



**Queensland University of Technology**  
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## **What can grassroots leadership teach us about school leadership?**

### **Abstract**

*Purpose:* This paper explores grassroots leadership, an under-researched and often sidelined approach to leadership that operates outside of formal bureaucratic structures. The paper's central purpose is the claim that an understanding of grassroots leadership and tactics used by grassroots leaders provides valuable insights for the study of school leadership.

*Proposed conceptual argument or model:* In this paper we present and discuss an original model of grassroots leadership based on the argument that this under-researched area can yield valuable insights for our understandings of school leadership. Drawing upon the limited literature in the field, we present a model consisting of two approaches to change (i.e. conflict and consensus) and two categories of change (i.e. reform and refinement) and then provide illustrations of how the model works in the practice. We make the argument that the model has much merit for conceptualizing school leadership and this is illustrated by applying the model to formal bureaucratic leadership within school contexts.

*Implications:* Given the current climate in education where business and management language within leadership preparation programs is pervasive, we argue that it is timely for university academics who are responsible for preparing school leaders to consider broadening their approach by exposing school leaders to a variety of change-based strategies and tactics used by grassroots leaders.

*Key words:* Grassroots leadership, conflict, university academics, change, community organizing

*Type of article:* Conceptual paper

## **What can grassroots leadership teach us about school leadership?**

### **Introduction**

It is almost a truism that persons who occupy formal bureaucratic positions in schools may not actually be leaders if they were not role incumbents in a bureaucracy. It is also clear from studies of grassroots leaders that without the qualities or skills of leadership no one would follow them because they have no formal, hierarchical role upon which others are dependent to them.

One of the reasons for re-examining the nature of grassroots leaders is to attempt to re-capture those tactics or strategies which might be re-conceptualized and utilized within more formal settings so that role dependent leadership becomes more effectual and trustworthy than one that is totally dependent on role authority. This reasoning is especially a critical need if there is a desire to work towards more democratic and collaborative working arrangements between leaders and followers, and where more flexible and dynamic relationships promise higher levels of commitment and productivity. Heckscher (1994) speaks of such a re-conceptualization as part of a shift from an emphasis on power to one centered on influence.

This paper examines the nature of leadership before it was subjected to positivistic science and later behavioral studies. This move follows the advice of Heilbrunn (1996) who trenchantly observed that for leadership studies to grow as a discipline, "it will have to cast a wider net" (p.11). Willie, Ridini and Willard (2008a) make a similar point when they lament that social scientists have favored a particular view of leadership, i.e. leadership in formal bureaucracies, rather than leadership in grassroots community organizations. Yet, they argue that much can be gained by being aware of the tactics and strategies used by grassroots leaders

who depend on influence as opposed to power. ~~This position was proposed by Foster (1986) nearly twenty-five years ago when- he observed that-~~ “Leadership can spring from anywhere...it derives from the context and ideas of individuals who influence each other. Thus, a principal may at times be a leader and at other times, a follower. A teacher may be a leader, and the principal a follower” (p. 187). Foster’s argument that “Leadership is an act bounded in space and time; it is an act that enables others and allows them, in turn, to become enablers” (p. 187) is reflected in this paper. ~~his paper, then, This paper It aims to do this by-~~ posing a model of grassroots leadership and then considering ~~ing~~ how this model might inform and be used by those responsible for developing school leaders.

### **Collective action and social movements**

Any discussion of grassroots leadership needs to be understood not only within the wider historical, social and cultural context in which it evolves and is exercised but also through the activity of collective action (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). Collective action is a broad term that includes a range of social movements and community development activities designed to bring about social change or social stability (Willie, Willard & Ridini, 2008b, p.19). Social movements are those movements established “for the common good as activity in which large numbers of participants attempt to modify existing norms and institutions” (Willie et al., 2008c, p.171).

According to Anugwom (2007), social movements can be understood also as a type of social phenomenon that emerges due to a need or aspiration within the social system. Gardner (1995) developed a similar explanation by proffering that leaders compete for followers by telling stories that connect with common perceived and felt needs. Some examples of significant

and successful social movements in history that have made substantial changes to the prevailing social order include the labor movement, the women's movement, and the civil rights movement.

Yet not all collective action is designed with the sole aim of reforming the social order or bringing about wide-sweeping social change (Willie et al., 2008a). Nor does collective action necessarily involve strikes, pickets, demonstrations or rallies. Collective action can take place with no major challenge to the status quo. For instance, like-minded people can work together to seek ways of improving situations or issues without any confrontation or struggle. Schutz and Sandy (2011) refer to this type of collective action as “politically palatable” (p.72) as it is concerned with “non-threatening collaborations” (p.72).

Two types of collective action that fit here are “community building / community improvement strategies” and “community development” (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). Community building / improvement is based on social engagement and change where groups of people at the grassroots level work collaboratively and democratically to undertake particular types of social activity. Community development activities are those where grassroots leaders work with representatives from various agencies or institutions to solve problems or improve aspects of local communities with the aim of ensuring that all parties are happy with the decision (Schutz & Sandy, 2011).

### **Grassroots Leaders and Grassroots Leadership**

As indicated earlier, grassroots leaders work with like-minded others by acting collectively to bring about some type of qualitative improvement or social change to their community. The term, grassroots leaders is also used interchangeably with the term community leaders where these leaders are usually volunteers, known within their local community, and who

work with others on an issue of common interest for improvement and change (Creyton & Ehrich, 2009, p.3).

This definition lies in contrast to Kezar's (2011) definition of grassroots leaders. Kezar describes grassroots leaders as members of a formal organization who engage in bottom up activities. Here she refers to faculty from higher education institutions who are involved in a diversity of bottom up activities (i.e. creating more flexible working conditions, using innovative pedagogies) which are seen as "oppositional to the corporate interests" (p. 478) of the institution. In another paper, Kezar et al. (2011) cite the work of Meyerson (2003) who used the term, "tempered radicals" to refer to institutional agents who lack formal authority but who work with others to create changes outside the existing power structures. They are seen to

reflect important aspects of leadership that are absent in the more traditional portraits. It is leadership that tends to be less visible, less coordinated, and less vested with formal authority; it is also more local, more diffuse, more opportunistic, and more humble than the activity attributed to the modern-day hero (Meyerson 2003, p.171 in Kezar et al., 2011, p.133).

While the context of an established organization where tempered radicals or informal leaders reside is quite different from a loosely coupled community group constituting grassroots volunteer leaders, both types of leaders share four important features:

1. They do not occupy any formal role within the respective community or organization. The implication is that anyone within the community or organization can exercise leadership, hence leadership is likely to be shared or distributed;

2. They are concerned with improvement or change utilizing a range of activities such as conflict based or consensual models of engagement;
3. They lack institutionalized power; and
4. They focus on a particular issue / cause and for this reason their leadership activity tends to be temporary and task-focused.

It is these four key features that constitute our view regarding grassroots leaders in this paper.

Another way of understanding grassroots leadership is to contrast it to formal leadership within a bureaucratic organization. Formal leadership occurs within bureaucratic institutions that have distinctive hierarchical structures of authority, designated superior/subordinate roles set within standard operating procedures. Leaders in these organizations are normally chosen on the basis of experience (seniority) and merit (Willie, 2008).

In contrast, grassroots leaders are people who operate in communities or organizations that are not usually hierarchical, but guided more by principles than rules (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). Leaders in grassroots organizations are those who are liked and in whom others have faith to lead them (Willie, 2008). They are able to operate because they have followers. Willie gives the example of Martin Luther King whose black community chose him to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott because he was well-liked and deemed to have the experience needed to build bridges to people outside his immediate community.

Another example of grassroots leadership is provided by Gornick (2011), biographer of Emma Goldman, the Russian anarchist who was imprisoned for her outspoken rejection to conscription in 1917. Not long after Goldman was in prison, the warden recognized how much

the other women admired her and he offered her the stewardship of the shop where the women toiled for hours sewing clothes. Goldman flatly refused as she saw herself not being a boss over anyone. News got around to the women and her rejection of the position strengthened the identification they felt for her. Because the women trusted her, they sought her assistance when they were mistreated, ill or needed support. She advocated on their behalf and because of the respect the warden had for her, she was successful in working with him to bring about more humane and tolerable conditions inside the prison for the women (Gornick, 2011, p.104).

The source of power that grassroots leaders draw upon, then, is *referent power* (French & Raven, 1959) since followers work with leaders not because they must, but because they identify with them and a common cause. In contrast, the source of power that formal leaders draw upon is legitimate power vouchsafed in legal documents which are coterminous with a position (French & Raven, 1959).

Compared to leaders in formal organizational roles, we would argue that grassroots leaders must build trust before any action is possible, whereas in formal organizations leaders may assume a position and then look to build trust. Nothing can happen in grassroots movements until and unless leaders and followers connect and share common beliefs rooted in mutual values and purposes. Trust is the essential glue to creating a cohesive community action organization from scratch and to sustain it over time. This kind of trust is relational and is also important in formal organizational leadership (Schmidt, 2010).

The grassroots leader has no organization to give him/her legitimacy or laws upon which he or she may lodge his or her power and authority. Grassroots leaders are then concentrating on activities that will gain followers before actions become possible. Grassroots leaders have to



listen carefully to what their followers say and do far more than leaders who inherit their positions in an already existing organization. Unlike leaders in formal organizations who are governed by rules and regulations and expected to abide by them, grassroots leaders operate in a different space where they have more freedom to invent their rules roles, and aims. Grassroots leaders tend to have differing interests and different priorities from formal leaders in organizations (Kezar, 2011).

The social field for grassroots leaders is fluid, dynamic and contested. If the leader is unsuccessful the movement, the cause, and actions are for naught. Without followers who will engage in actions, the grassroots leader has no future. Grassroots leaders who are unsuccessful have no place to hide. In contrast, leaders in existing organizations may go on for some time before it is noticed that they may not be doing their jobs well. This phenomenon is so universally recognized that books have been written about the inability of bureaucratic organizations to deal with incompetent administrators. Perhaps the most famous is Laurence Peter's (1970) principle that, "in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence" (Peter & Hull, 1979, p. 7) and the real "work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence" (p.10).

Tactics and strategies used by grassroots leaders to achieve their goals tend to be different from those used by leaders occupying formal positions. For example, community organizing, conscientious raising, direct action (i.e. rallies, protests, demonstrations), networks, and passive resistance have been used by grassroots leaders and followers to bring about social change. To this list we can add those proffered by Checkoway (1995) who identifies six strategies of community change including mass mobilization, social action, citizen participation, public advocacy, popular education, and local services development. All of these strategies are said to

provide an approach towards community empowerment and change, yet each differs in its “pattern of practice” (Checkoway, 1995, p.16). In relation to “tempered radicals” working within established organizations, Meyerson (2003 in Kezar et al., 2011) refers to distinct change approaches that fall on a continuum from most tempered (where the individual “resists quietly”) to “organizing collective action” which is the least tempered and therefore the most risky in terms of keeping one’s job.

There are also tactics and strategies used by grassroots activists that are violent and involve bombing, torture and killing. Such extreme tactics are referred to as “armed struggle” (Martin 2007, p.21). Moreover there is sabotage such as violating or defacing property (Martin, 2007). Of interest to this paper are strategies that are non-violent.

### **Towards a tentative model of grassroots leadership**

In this paper we present a model to illustrate the categories of change and approaches to it utilized by grassroots leaders and then those of bureaucratic leaders. The purpose of the model and contrast is to more finely chisel the differences between them and to attempt to see where formal preparation programs might benefit from strategies of change that could be transferred from one context to another.

Two broad categories of change are reformist and refinement. The goal of reformist approaches is the achievement of an alternative vision of a better society through social change, while the goal of refinement is minimal or at best incremental change since potential actions always have to consider system stability. If the system is destroyed by a strategy then by definition it cannot be changed. It simply ceases to exist. Reformist change is mainly “bottom up”

where people work together to effect change that directly affects them, while refinement can be “top down” or “bottom up”. The model contains four quadrants as shown. In the discussion that follows, we provide more discussion of cell A: tactics of confrontation, as this approach tends not to be discussed in the educational leadership literature to the same extent as the other three approaches.

**Insert Table 1 here**

### **1. Cell A: Reformist / Conflict = Tactics of confrontation**

Conflict is the essential core of a free and open society. If one were to project the democratic way of life in the form of a musical score, its major theme would be the harmony of dissonance (Alinsky, 1989, p.62).

This first quadrant (cell A) can be best understood by referring to the work of Saul Alinsky (1989) who developed a tradition of community organizing that continues to be used today. Community organizing is a type of social action that is usually a key part of any successful social movement (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.41). [It has been viewed as “building power that results in social justice” \(Smyth, 2011, p. 125\).](#) It occurs where members of a small and powerless group under the leadership of organizers and grassroots or “native” leaders use a variety of confrontational strategies to gain power. Alinsky (1989) said “the only way the status quo can be shifted ... is by generating friction and heat” (p. 96) through community organizing. As such, community organizing “seeks to alter the relations of power between the groups who have traditionally controlled ... society and the residents of marginalized communities” (Schutz

& Sandy, 2011, p. 12). Alinsky's work has been described as reformist because of his strategy to work within the system to "denounce the administration, attack its policies, work to build an oppositional political base" (Alinsky, 1989, p. xxi).

An important facet of community organizing is the belief that those people most affected by a problem are those best able to resolve it. For this reason, people with a common need or common disadvantage are brought together by organizers where they are able to make their demands known through their leaders (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.12). It is the collective oppositional voice that is used to shift the power balance.

Organizers are those people who provide ideas for tactics, provocation, and support and training for leaders. The training is designed to help leaders understand the complexity of specific issues (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.13). A goal of the organizers is to empower both leaders and members of the community so that they have the confidence, drive and hope to continue the fight for justice and equality (Alinsky, 1989). Organizers can come from within a community or outside it and in most cases are paid for their work (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.24). In contrast, leaders or native leaders (Alinsky, 1989) are those people who are usually unpaid, but undertake the bulk of the community organizing.

Native leaders require a very good understanding of members within their community. They are recognized by them as representing their interests and sharing their struggle (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.101). The relationships between leaders and members of their community are strong and based on trust. Indeed, the values that are held by leaders and organizers are those that respect "the preciousness of human life" and the values of "freedom, equality, justice, peace, the right to dissent" (Alinsky, 1989, p.46).

Alinsky (1989, p. 47) viewed democracy not as “an end but as the best political means available toward the achievement of these values” (p.47). By democracy he meant representative democracy based on a model of leadership (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p.101). At this juncture it is important to distinguish between the bottom up democratic approach used by organizers and leaders to empower their community to take action, and the conflict based approach (drawing upon tactics of confrontation) used by the organizers, leaders and their followers to seize the power from those who possess it.

Understanding power and how it works is central to the work of organizers and leaders within community organizing (Alinsky, 1989). In his book, *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky (1989) puts forward a number of power tactics for organizers to guide them as they work towards seizing power. Alinsky says that tactics are not always carefully prepared; rather there is always an element of unpredictability and improvisation requiring creativity and flexibility on the part of the organizer. A selection of these tactics (taken from Alinsky, 1989, pp. 127-130) is:

- *Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have*
- *never go outside the experience of your people*
- *Wherever possible go outside the experience of the enemy*
- *Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules*
- *Ridicule is man's [sic] most potent weapon*
- *A good tactic is one that your people enjoy*
- *A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag*
- *Keep the pressure on*
- *The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself*

- *Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it*

### **A consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of *Cell A-Tactics of Confrontation***

As might be expected, the downside of using the tactics of the confrontation cell is that success is not always a likely outcome. As Schutz and Sandy (2011), claim, “highly experienced organizers often fail. It is always difficult to win against the powerful” (p.118). Another downside, associated with any type of activism, is that it can be very challenging for leaders and followers to maintain interest in the level of activism that is warranted as social movements can decline or be incorporated into formal systems (Martin, 2007). An advantage is that leaders and followers can focus on issues that are central to their values and beliefs and as Hart (2009, p.177) claims, “part of the reward of grassroots activism and leadership for social change is the intrinsic value of doing work that is personally important and interesting”.

### **2. Cell B: Reformist / Consensual = Tactics of Collaboration / democracy / distribution**

In contrast to the confrontation approach that seizes power lies the consensual approach, which concerns collaborative activities to bring about change. Like the confrontation approach, its main goal is to reform the system and leaders within this approach would work within the current system in an attempt to improve social and working conditions. However, the tactics used by leaders would be very different from those used by followers of confrontationists, such as Alinsky. Grassroots leaders working within the reformist / consensual quadrant would aim to resolve conflicts through negotiation rather than force and central to their way of working would

be making alliances and building coalitions through “generating reciprocal relationships” (Willie et al., 2008c, p.186).

Willie et al. (2008a) examine several case studies of grassroots social action in the United States and conclude that leaders used consensual approaches to social action where they shared responsibility among the members. By doing so, decision making by the group was based on consensus, and all persons had the opportunity to develop their leadership skills by playing different roles. Alinsky would describe this consensual approach as “not offend[ing] one’s fellow man [sic]” (Alinsky, 1989, p.62).

### ***A consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of Cell B-Consensual Approaches to Change***

Following a consensual, non-adversarial approach to change is one where reform can become mutually enhancing in a “win-win” approach for all stakeholders. The major disadvantage is that modest change rather than radical change may be the result if compromise is used to ensure a win-win for all. Moreover, consensus and collaboration are not possible in situations where the parties are not prepared to work together or when one party senses unfairness or cooption from the other party (Peters & Hickman, 2010).

### **3. Cell C: Refinement / conflict = Conflict avoidance**

Of the four quadrants, this one is the least democratic and least focused on any threat to the status quo. Conflict avoidance is the strategy used by leaders who do not wish to reform the system; rather their objective is to maintain the existing social order, albeit sometimes without

their being conscious of it. This lack of awareness Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) called *misrecognition*. It occurs because, in Bourdieu's thinking, "all actions are interested. The logic of self-interest underlying all practices--particularly those in the cultural domain—is misrecognized as a logic of 'disinterest'...This misperception legitimizes these practices and thereby contributes to the reproduction of the social order in which they are embedded" (Swartz, 1997, p. 90).

The goal in this quadrant is the preservation of the status quo since grassroots leaders do not act because conflict is avoided at all costs. The decision to take no action is likely to be top-down thus making this quadrant the least democratic. This position stands in marked contrast to much of the writing about grassroots leadership where leaders use "methods of attaining consensus and reconciliation" (Centre for Community Action in Willie et al., 2008, p.13) in an attempt to bring about change, and where grassroots leaders "play a key role in mobilizing others in their pursuit of common interest for improvement and change" (Creyton & Ehrich, 2009, p.3).

#### **A consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of *Cell C-Conflict Avoidance***

The main disadvantage of conflict avoidance is that there is minimal if any action and consequently very little if any change. Here the grassroots leader does not exercise any effort that would bring conflict. It is possible that inactivity could disempower followers if their desire is for more of a proactive approach. An advantage of taking no conflict may be that the grassroots leader considers the timing is not appropriate or the consequences of taking the action might be too risky and dangerous. In this way, inaction or withdrawal is preferable to action that may have detrimental consequences for the followers and/ or the cause.

#### **4. Cell D: Refinement / consensual = collaborative /democratic / distributive**



Refinement / consensual as a category of change is, as the title indicates, based on refining the status quo and not reforming it. Hence change tends to be minimal. If change is introduced it can be either bottom up or top down. Where change is instigated, it can be likened to a “power through” approach or a facilitative process whereby the grassroots leader works within an established or acceptable framework for change and where followers work together collaboratively and democratically to achieve that change.

#### **A consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of *Cell D-Consensual-Refinement***

An advantage of the consensual refinement approach is that both leaders and followers have the opportunity to work together to bring about change. However, the change is usually of the refinement variety rather than reform. Social change is not the result because the status quo is not threatened in any way.

#### **Determining the most appropriate approach: The criticality of context**

In considering which may be the most appropriate strategy to use for effective community action, whether it be conflict, consensus or avoidance of change, Willie et al. (2008b, p.13) say it depends on a number of intersecting factors. This is where context plays a key part in determining the strategies and tactics used. Couto (2010) maintains that the values of leaders will play a big role in determining the kind of change pursued, the type of tactics and strategies used, and who will participate in the process. For this reason, he says that clarity about one's values is an important starting point for making decisions.

Alinsky (1989) noted that “There can be no prescriptions for particular situations because the same situation rarely recurs, any more than history repeats itself. People, pressures, and patterns of power are variables, and a particular combination exists only in a particular time” (p.138). The next part of the discussion, then, expands the model by providing an illustration of grassroots leadership tactics that fall within each of the cells.

**Insert Table 2 here**

### **1. Cell A- Reformist / Conflict = Tactics of confrontation**

Understanding power and how it works is central to the work of organizers and leaders who operate within the conflict model of community organizing (Alinsky, 1989). In the illustration below, Alinsky applied one of his golden rules: “the threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself” (p.146) to a particular example of community organizing. As it turned out, the threat alone of the confrontation was enough to make the body that held the power (i.e. the department store in the illustration) change its policies.

The tactic Alinsky planned was to organize 3 000 blacks to be bused downtown to enter the store where they would occupy the clerks’ attention asking questions about price, colors, style, and so on, and then an hour before closing time, they would start to purchase merchandise causing chaos. To set the tactic in action, Alinsky organized a series of committees (i.e. a transportation committee to get the buses, the mobilization committee, other committees). Yet the tactic did not need to be enforced because the authorities learned of the tactic and decided to take action to prevent any likelihood of it happening. Not long after, the department store contacted Alinsky and his team to discuss new personnel policies. Based on this threatened tactic, 186 new jobs were opened and blacks were employed for the first time on the sales floor.

## **2. Cell B: Reformist / Consensual = Collaborative / democratic / distributive**

The case taken from Hickman (2010) is an illustration of how a violent act perpetrated against an ethnic minority group prompted a couple of its members to establish a social movement to fight against violent and discriminatory behavior. The movement spread across the US and led to collective action that resulted in changes to the law.

The Sikh Coalition was established in response to a series of violent attacks after 9/11 directed to members of the Sikh community by fellow Americans. After a violent attack on an elderly person and two teenagers, the Sikh coalition (formed by a group of concerned Sikhs) sent press releases to the newspapers condemning the attacks and pleading with the police for better protection. The coalition sent press release kits to other Sikh communities across the country and asked them to become involved. With the help of an activist, the group established a website to record the hate crimes across the country, plus a chat board and media resources. Other activists joined the virtual coalition and the coalition spread across many states in the country. The coalition worked with the US justice department to battle the hatred and a contingent was established to work with the media to educate the public. The Coalition was formally incorporated as a volunteer led organization. An important win was it persuaded the US Senate to pass a resolution to recognize Sikh Americans and to condemn hate crimes in the community. Since its inception, the Coalition has used a variety of strategies to tackle the issue of discrimination faced by its community members and these strategies included education, advocacy, community organizing and legal action. To date the Sikh Coalition comprises a core of 15 Sikhs who volunteer between 10-30 hours per week to protecting the community (Hickman, 2010, pp. 221-223).

### 3. Cell C: Refinement / conflict = Conflict avoidance

One tactic used by grassroots leaders is to seek conflict because conflict is visualized as a necessary ingredient to build camaraderie among the ranks and to polarize the opposition to a change or revolutionary agenda. The only time when the grassroots leader may avoid conflict is when his or her side is not fully prepared as in the case when Gandhi's followers had to be trained in non-violent confrontation or in a similar case with Nelson Mandela's work in training members of the ANC to confront the government Apartheid forces. Another time is when, in the case of Gandhi, he found it necessary "to withdraw into oneself to find a basis for actions" at the same time observing that "it [conflict avoidance] can never justify the abdication of one's responsibility or a passive resort to continued inaction" (Iyer, 1973, p. 60).

The fundamental difference between the informal grassroots leader and the formal leader regarding inaction or conflict avoidance is that a leader within an organization can ask, "What will happen if we do nothing?" and expect that in some cases a dilemma may actually "go away" (see Drucker, 1974, p. 475). But for the grassroots leader he or she is acutely aware that "doing nothing" means "nothing will happen" and that means that change produced by conflict will die aborning. The only time inaction is functional for grassroots leaders is when a movement does not yet have sufficient force or cohesion or there has to be a time for deciding the next course of action. Before Gandhi's infamous salt march to the sea, he had been waiting to hear his "inner voice" to provide direction. His followers waited for him to hear it and when he did, one of his most famous acts of rebellion occurred (Fischer, 1950, p. 264).

Nelson Mandela (2011) spoke of the need for "national unity" when he said that:

At no other time in the history of the liberation movement has it been so crucial for our people to speak with one voice, and for freedom fighters to pool their efforts. Any act or statement, from whatever source, which tends to create and worsen divisions is, in the existing political situation, a fatal error which ought to be avoided at all costs (p. 255).

#### **4. Cell D: Refinement / consensual = collaborative / democratic / distributive**

Hickman (2010) provides a case study of community advocacy that fits within the refinement / consensual quadrant. In this instance, a parent's desire to learn more about her son's medical condition led her to establish OASIS, an on-line Asperger Syndrome Information and Support website. Her motivation for starting the movement came from her very personal experience and the movement grew when like-minded others joined it and pooled their resources.

Hickman (2010, pp. 198-200) describes the momentum for the establishment of the OASIS (On-line Asperger Syndrome Information and Support) when a parent began posting messages on a disability forum and making connections to others who had an interest in learning more about it. This led to the establishment of a chat room for interested people to share information and provide support and understanding and then to the establishment of a website: OASIS in 1996. The parent who instigated the movement was engaged in social networking where she was keen to find and attract like-minded people to form part of the community. There is a current membership of 5000 families that subscribe to the website who access resources, share information, and support services. OASIS, like other mental health associations, started out as a self-help group that then extended its base to advocate for legislation and became

involved with health service agencies and research, thus making a contribution to a change in mental health services (Hickman 2010, p.203)

### **Applying the model to formal, bureaucratic school leaders**

We now sketch out how the same quadrants of our model could be applied to describe the work of formal, bureaucratic school leaders, the kind that universities typically produce in most preparation programs.

#### **1. Cell A: Reformist / Conflict = Tactics of confrontation**

An example of a formal leader employing the tactics of confrontation is provided by Lopez et al. (2006). In this case Lopez highlights an illustration of collective action where a school leader saw his role as not only helping to raise parents' awareness of wider social issues impacting upon the education of their children, but also equipping them with the knowledge and skills they needed to challenge the status quo and bring about change. The approach used by parents of confronting and lobbying legislators and the superintendent were examples of conflict strategies.

A school principal called Jones (pseudonym) worked in an elementary school focused on language development along the US – Mexican border. Being an avid believer in language development and bilingualism, Jones was quite concerned that schools often alienate parents whose first language is not English. To remedy the situation, he realized he needed to take a more active role in the broader community to help parents become socially active in their children's education. To do this, he joined a community group whose philosophy was aligned to the activism of Saul Alinsky. Influenced by this philosophy, he became an organizer for parents

and the wider community bringing them together, plus local churches and other community groups to discuss key issues regarding student failure.

The community group also provided an important forum for parents to learn about issues of power and how to challenge government and school district officials. One of the tactics parents used was that a delegation of them travelled to the state capital to meet with legislators to whom they asked uncomfortable questions such as how they were going to vote and questions about school funding. Parents also lobbied the superintendent so that he would agree to some of the decisions they saw as important. When the superintendent refused, parents and staff took action which influenced the voting at the board election culminating in the replacement of board members who had supported the superintendent. When the superintendent insisted that Jones “control the parents” and Jones refused, Jones was charged with “administrative noncompliance” and “professional wrongdoings”. Parental support of Jones could not save him; he was transferred to another school (Lopez et al., 2006).

## **2. Cell B: Reformist/Consensual=Collaborative/democratic/distributive**

This case study from Branting et al. (2008) below includes two approaches to change: a conflict avoidance approach and then a democratic / consensual approach. Conflict avoidance was the strategy preferred by the principal who forbade high school students from engaging in a confrontational approach to raise awareness about an issue. Based on advice, the students pursued a collaborative and consensual route by enlisting the support of others in the School to achieve their goal. The result was a win-win for all parties.

Branting, Parks and Ridini (2008) describe the Alpha case study on human sexuality and health education that was a successful grassroots community effort (involving coalitions of

students, parents and community members) that improved the curriculum about health and sexuality education in a school in the USA. It began with two students who became quite disturbed by findings in a survey that showed nearly half of their peers in the school were sexually active. The students formed a Committee known as the Student Committee on Sexual Awareness (with a membership of 22 students) to discuss what could be done to raise awareness about the associated health risks of having unprotected sex. One of the students decided on a plan to hand out condoms to all students in the school. Opposition to this plan came from the principal who threatened to suspend the student if she proceeded; moreover, the student's mother suggested a more conciliatory approach to dealing with the issue.

Based on the adults' advice, the students sought support from the Parent Teacher Association that recommended they work with members of the school and wider community to bring about change. Students managed to get several hundred signatures to support their cause. Meanwhile, students at a school nearby who had launched a similar campaign offered their assistance and the result was the collection of one thousand signatures from this school. Signatures from students, parents and teachers from both school communities were sought and students presented their petition to the School Committee.

Spearheaded by the petition, the Alpha School Committee held a number of community forums attended by students, parents and members of the wider community where they discussed the issue of condoms plus the existing guidelines on sexuality. The result was that the School committee voted to make condoms available in Alpha's high school. The School committee, with support from the administrators, also established a taskforce comprising parents, teachers,



students, and other professionals to develop a more comprehensive health and sexuality education curriculum. The taskforce developed a pilot program for ninth grade followed by curriculum for K-12.

### 3. Cell C: Refinement=conflict avoidance

An example of conflict avoidance, sometimes called by those who have studied organizations “deliberate delay” and/or “vacillation” (Rogers, 1968, p.395) is represented in Cell C. This approach was succinctly described in the failure of the New York City Schools to bring about racial integration of its schools in the sixties. Among the tactics used by the board *not* to make a decision were these:

- Lengthy public hearings
- Studies and committees that hashed over old studies
- Diluting or discarding innovative plans
- Hiring outside experts who develop plans that are not used
- Insulation behind highly technical arguments that are used to cast doubt regarding the feasibility of the possible change
- Roping off change from the larger system where it can be contained
- Diffusing authority for monitoring change so widely that no one is responsible or accountable (Rogers, 1968, p. 396).

Some reports of inaction in formal organizations concern the phenomenon of “groupthink” in which the concern of the leader on avoiding discomfort and the high intensity of effort aimed at retaining group cohesiveness (or “concurrence-seeking”) results in potential decisions which

are at odds with the coziness of the group being silenced. This is a strong form of self-censorship including that of the leader (Janis, 2008, p.306).

#### **4. Cell D: Refinement/consensual=collaborative/democratic/distributive**

The example for this quadrant was adapted from a case study provided by Smeed et al. (2009) which highlights the skill of a principal in supporting his staff to engage purposefully in understanding and implementing a mandated curriculum change. In this scenario, staff were given a say regarding the professional development activities in which they engaged that helped them to grasp the top down change. It is an example of facilitative leadership or “power through” where leadership of the principal can be described as transactional in focus since it involved negotiation.

Blair was an experienced principal of an inner city school in Australia. The school employed a team of two deputy principals, one registrar and 30 teachers and support staff. Blair’s leadership was that he led from beside his deputies and informed staff about changes to the school. As well as being inclusive, Blair recognized and drew upon the expertise of teachers and shared his leadership role with members of his administrative team. Blair and his team were faced with implementing a new science syllabus. To do this, he and his team decided to engage the work of three experienced consultants. The consultants conducted sessions around the teachers’ expressed needs regarding the new curriculum. These sessions raised the personal energy, contribution and competence in the teachers and paraprofessional staff members who were included in the sessions. (Adapted from Smeed et al., 2009). The next part of the paper considers the implications of the model for university academic programs.

### **Implications of the model for university preparation programs**

In the section that follows we identify two implications the model poses for university preparation programs and university academics who are responsible for teaching in these programs. These are (i) the value of and need for an alternative perspective of leadership given the current managerial and technical flavor of current programs; and (ii) the challenge the model presents to university academics regarding the way they teach and work with students of leadership in their classes.

#### **(i) The need for an alternative perspective of leadership**

Dominating the discourse of university programs for school leaders in the US over the last decade has been the implementation of a set of national standards for school leaders by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). These standards have been used in over 30 states to judge university preparation programs and those programs that do not comply face closure thus eroding the autonomy of universities to prepare school leaders (English, 2008).

The narrowness of the standards and the strict controls placed upon university preparation programs to uphold these standards are symptoms of a much broader neo-liberal economic agenda manifested in the deskilling of teachers and educators, a focus on free markets and efficiency, and the sidelining of the democratic goals of schooling (Giroux, 2012). Given the current climate in education where business and management language within leadership preparation programs is pervasive (Bolton & English, 2010), it becomes even more imperative for university programs to make whatever space they can to provide alternative perspectives of leadership.

Soho, Merchant and Lugg (2011) claim that since the 1990s there has been a focus on social justice as an important content area within university preparation programs across the country as a “countervailing perspective” (p.44) to the rationalist scientific approach that dominated the field since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus on social justice has emerged due to a heightened awareness that schools are implicated in reproducing social inequality and that action is required to help administrators understand the relationship between schools and the wider social context. A number of researchers have argued strongly for decades that preparation programs need to challenge school leaders to have a better understanding of the social and political context in which they work and how that context impacts upon schooling (see Beck, 1994; Lumby & English, 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). The assumption is that if school administrators are more aware of social justice issues then they will be more likely to work towards addressing inequality in their schools ([Smyth, 1989](#); Soho et al., 2011).

The perspective we are advocating in this paper is one that gains its inspiration from grassroots leadership that upholds the traditions and values of democracy and social justice. We see the main contribution of the model presented in this paper as providing a different way of conceptualizing leadership and leadership strategies for change. Our contention is that, of the four quadrants in the model, the conflict or confrontation approach (in Cell A) is the one that is marginalized in the policy and practice of preparing school leaders. This is not surprising as universities are preparing students to work within conservative institutions that are designed to maintain institutional stability thus reproducing the status quo (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Swartz, 1997).

Leaders within schools are contractually accountable to the system to support the system that pays their salary; they are not encouraged to question the system or fight it. In his seminal book, *Heroes and Heretics*, Dunham (1964) makes a similar point when he refers to administrators as protectors and defenders of orthodoxy. He says,

one must expect, that an administrator will undertake to manage the affairs which come before him [sic] and that he will follow procedures laid down as basic by the organization ... one must at least respect the administrator defending the life and unity of his organization. He has cares which the mere member has not, and problems far more formidable. (p.22)

What Dunham has eloquently identified is the complex terrain in which leaders inhabit by virtue of their formal position and the expectations placed upon them to conform and preserve stability. We would argue, therefore, that school leaders are more likely to engage in refinements rather than bottom up reform that “rocks the boat” by challenging the basic assumption of schooling (English, 2008). The type of large scale reform that has beset schools across the US in recent decades has been top down and based on standards at state and national levels. The effect of the climate of stringent accountability and measurement has been to diminish the creative space available to school leaders to bring about bottom up change efforts using collaborative approaches. Yet, in this context of constraint both within schools and universities, we [concur with Greenfield and Ribbins \(1993\) and English \(2008\) who see there is an urgent need for developers of](#) ~~maintain it is incumbent on academics via~~ school leadership

programs to find opportunities to expose students of leadership to alternative leadership narratives including [the narrative of](#) grassroots leadership. Following Weick's (1995) lead, we maintain that by being exposed to a new perspective may have the effect of "draw[ing] attention to new possibilities" (p.4) thus allowing school leaders an opportunity to engage in sensemaking from a broader framework.

Chief among the preparation of successful grassroots leaders, from Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, is as Temes (1996) wrote of King:

... he could lead because he lived and worked among ordinary people who were oppressed. He could lead because he sought to understand what they wanted and what they needed. No theory about the nature of leadership and no understanding of the traits of leaders in general could substitute for this. To teach students to be leaders, then, we must help them cultivate a serious understanding of ordinary people as they live today. To cultivate qualities of leadership in our students, we must strive to instill in them the habit of social observation, of asking about the lives of everyone who lives and works with them, and for them, above them, below them, and beside them. (p.76)

We see that grassroots leaders as those people who have "faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems, and policies" (Beane & Apple, 1995, p.7)

**(ii) the challenge the model presents to university academics to consider ways they work with students of leadership.**

A key implication of our argument is the big challenge it poses for university academics regarding their willingness to entertain the ideas that have been put forward. From this platform we put a challenge to university academics of educational leadership to consider what the confrontation approach (as indicated in Cell A from our model) might mean to the way they think about and teach leadership. Taking this idea further, we see that academics occupy an ideal position in the academy to expose students to ideas regarding the confrontation approach. This exposure could be via teaching community organizing within school preparation programs and/or it could mean becoming or working alongside community organizers.

According to Alinsky, a central job of community organizers is developing leaders. Community organizers develop leaders by providing training and giving advice about tactics and negotiations (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). Their goal is the “creation of power for [leaders and] others to use” (Alinsky, 1989, p.80), while the leaders in concert with their people, take action to bring about change. The role of the organizer is to identify problems that affect people and to help them recognize they can improve their situation (Alinsky, 1989). Out of the conflict emerges creative solutions (Goldblatt, 2005).

We argue that because community organizing is “grounded in the core traditions of American democracy” (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p. 2), it has value for schooling as an important institution in a democracy. There are many issues in education that are worth fighting for. By teaching school leaders about the strategies and tactics of change, university academics could

help prepare them to identify and tap into the issues that their school community cares passionately enough about to take action.

It seems that universities across the country already teach community organizing as part of their undergraduate and graduate-level programs in education, health and other discipline areas (Flick et al., 1994, Schutz, 2007; Shirley, 2009). Moreover, community organizing is now part of the research focus of some education programs (Shirley, 2009). As far as we know, community organizing and other conflict based strategies tend not to form part of the curriculum for school leadership preparation programs.

The most radical suggestion we put forward is that university academics might consider becoming community organizers. We appreciate the provocative challenge that this is likely to present because it is asking academics to consider becoming agitators who “provoke conflict for the purpose of drawing people into action together” (Goldblatt, 2005, p.282). Goldblatt (2005, p.282) is correct in his assertion that the view of an organizer is likely to be at odds with the view of educators such as teachers and university academics since they may not see their role as attempting to “alter the relations of power between groups that have traditionally controlled our society” (Schutz & Sandy 2010, p.12). Any involvement in community organizing, then, raises the tension between the political and the educational (Shirley, 2009, p.180) and the question of whether educators such as university academics should or would become involved in such activities. Moreover, it raises the question of whether university academics have the actual skill set required (Goldblatt, 2005; Stoeker, 1999) or would be prepared to undertake any training.



It may be more commonplace for university academics who have an interest in community organizing to either work alongside community organizers in the field or undertake research (including participatory research) to document the process. For example, Goldblatt (2005) referred to himself as a “knowledge activist when he worked with community organizers in his neighborhood to improve literacy for the people. As knowledge activist, he drew upon institutional resources from the university (including funding, access to volunteers, organizing internships and assistantships) to help support the relationship with the neighborhood partner. His preference is for university academics to be knowledge activists rather than “detached observers or paid consultants” (Goldblatt, 2005, p.294).

Over the last fifteen years the field of community organizing for educational change has expanded rapidly (Shirley, 2009) and educational researchers have begun to direct their attention to it (see Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2009; Oaks, Rogers & Lipton, 2006; Stoeker 1999; [Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009](#)). As an illustration, Stoeker (1999), who uses participatory research to engage in community activities saw his main contribution as “documenting the neighborhood’s struggle and spreading the word of what happened so that the neighborhood could remember itself and others could adapt their model” (p.851). [Another example is the activist and socially critical research of Smyth et al. \(2009\) who explored an alternative paradigm of community renewal that invested in local leadership, developed the skills base of locals to participate in decision making, and emphasized relationship building within the school and wider community. Through ethnographic investigations, the authors were able to demonstrate illustrations of hopeful critical pedagogy where community leaders and administrators worked together to create more socially just curriculum for students in their](#)

[schools. The authors utilized the insights of Saul Alinsky to make sense of the community renewal process that was used in one of their case schools.](#)

The final challenge that we raise here fits within a larger call for educators to take action to uphold the values of democracy. That larger call has been made by Giroux (2008, 2012) and others (see Apple & Beane, 1995; [Smyth, 2001](#); [Woods, 2005](#); [Smyth et al., 2009](#)) who challenge university academics to connect their work to broader social issues and to speak out against anti-democratic tendencies in society. Giroux (2012) claims that university academics' reluctance to be more proactive in social and political action can be explained by the intensification of work demanded of the profession and the "suppression of dissent within and outside of the academy" (p.99). Nyden (2003) also claims that university academics tend to "be defenders of constraining academic traditions" (p.2). We agree with Said (in Giroux 2012, pp. 106-107) who argues that the university is one of the few places left where questioning and critical thought can still take place. His feeling is that academics need to connect their work to public life by raising awareness about issues that pose a threat to democracy by utilizing a variety of forums (i.e. lectures, the internet, rallies, publishing in journals). [Citing the work of C. Wright Mills, Smyth et al. \(2009\) invite academics to cross "the boundaries between academia and activism" in order to "extend the notion of activism as it relates to schools and communities" \(p. 3\).](#) Regarding the aforementioned implications, we are fully cognizant of the words of Beane and Apple (1995) who state that "[b]ringing democracy to life is [likely to be] ... a struggle" (p.8) .

### Summary

In closing, we are aware that while we cited some empirical studies as examples of our model quadrants to validate their identity, the model per se has not been empirically tested. Our plan in the future is to undertake a research agenda where we compile case study biographies of university academics and school leaders who have utilized different types of conflict strategies in their leadership praxis in Australia and the US. We anticipate that the outcomes of this international collaborative research project should make a contribution not only to the limited research that exists in the field, but also in the development of a set of case studies that could form part of the content of university preparation programs for school leaders.

We think in pursuing this line of inquiry that we may be working in what Erich Fromm said in a book by Ivan Illich (1969, p.8) that it is work in the “radical humanist” tradition. This perspective is based on critical questions regarding common sense assumptions and institutions. “It is a widening of awareness, of imaginative, creative vision of our possibilities and options” (p.8). We agree with Illich that there is value in joining together to question and confront existing values and institutions, that we can redress past inequalities by ending coercive power and in particular power that resides in hierarchy, and finally that we have a responsibility to create a better and kinder future.

We also believe that grassroots leadership strategies can lead to “praxis”, that is (Foster, 1986) “practical action, informed by theory, that attempts to change various conditions” (p. 167) and that these efforts suggest “a continuing and ongoing trial of different ways of organizing reality that is itself subject to the process of problematization of critical inquiry” (p. 166). To do things differently we must first think differently about them.

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CATEGORIES OF CHANGE	APPROACHES TO CHANGE	
	CONFLICT	CONSENSUAL
	A	B
REFORMIST	Tactics of confrontation	Collaborative / democratic distributive
REFINEMENT	C Conflict Avoidance	D Collaborative / democratic distributive

Table 1: A model of change goals and leadership actions

APPROACHES TO CHANGE		
CATEGORIES OF CHANGE	CONFLICT	CONSENSUAL
	<b>REFORMIST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires conflict to build group solidarity and provoke the enemy's response and possible overreaction</li> <li>- Try and construct a common "win-win" agenda with the opponent on a common vision</li> <li>- Generate reciprocal relationships</li> </ul>
	<b>REFINEMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Selecting one's fights, avoiding some but focusing on those deemed essential to maintain solidarity and which have a good chance of succeeding</li> <li>- Change is so small that it is not significant</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Strategies used by grassroots leaders**

